

Henry Box Brown

By Gaming with Dj Pumpkin

Henry Box Brown



The Narrative of Henry Box Brown (1849)

Born	Henry Brown
	c. 1815
	Louisa County, Virginia , US
Died	June 15, 1897 (aged 81–82)
	Toronto, Ontario , Canada
Nationality	American
Occupation	Abolitionist
Spouse(s)	First wife – Nancy (sold by slaveowner) Second wife – Jane Floyd

Henry Box Brown (c. 1815 – June 15, 1897)^[1] was a 19th-century [Virginia](#) slave who escaped to freedom at the age of 33 by arranging to have himself [mailed](#) in a wooden crate in 1849 to [abolitionists](#) in [Philadelphia](#), [Pennsylvania](#).

For a short time, Brown became a noted abolitionist speaker in the northeast United States. As a public figure and fugitive slave, Brown felt extremely endangered by the passage of the [Fugitive Slave Law of 1850](#), which increased the pressure to capture escaped slaves. He moved to [England](#) and lived there for 25 years, touring with an anti-slavery panorama, and becoming a [magician](#) and showman.^[2]

Brown married and started a family with an English woman, Jane Floyd. Brown's first wife, Nancy, remained in slavery. Brown returned to the United States with his English family in 1875, where he continued to earn a living as an entertainer. He toured and performed as a magician, speaker, and [mesmerist](#) until at least 1889. The last decade of his life (1886–97) was spent in Toronto, where he died in 1897.^[1]

Childhood and slavery

Henry Brown was born into slavery in 1815 or 1816 on a plantation called Hermitage in [Louisa County, Virginia](#).^[1] Henry was religious from an early age, stating that his mother was the one to instill Christian values into him. He is believed to have had at least two siblings, because he mentioned a brother and a sister in his autobiography.^[3] At age 15 he was sent to work in a tobacco factory in Richmond.^[4]

In his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*, he describes his owner: "Our master was uncommonly kind, (for even a slaveholder may be kind) and as he moved about in his dignity he seemed like a god to us, but not with standing his kindness although he knew very well what superstitious notions we formed of him, he never made the least attempt to correct our erroneous impression, but rather seemed pleased with the reverential feelings which we entertained towards him."^[5]



The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia a [lithograph](#) by [Samuel Rowse](#) published in 1850

Escape

Brown was first married to a fellow slave named Nancy, but their marriage was not recognized legally. They had three children born into slavery under the [partus sequitur ventrem](#) principle, according to which, children born to enslaved women were themselves enslaved. Brown was hired out by his master in [Richmond, Virginia](#), and worked in a tobacco factory. He rented a house, where he and his wife lived with their children.^[6] Brown had also been paying his wife's master to not sell

his family, but the man betrayed Brown by selling Nancy, who was pregnant at the time, and their three children to a different slave owner.^[1]

With the help of James C. A. Smith, a free black man,^[4] and a sympathetic white shoemaker named Samuel A. Smith (no relation), Brown devised a plan to have himself shipped in a box to a free state by the [Adams Express Company](#), known for its confidentiality and efficiency.^[6] Brown paid US\$86 (equivalent to \$3,025 in 2022) (out of his savings of \$166) to Samuel Smith.^[6]

Smith went to [Philadelphia](#) to consult members of the [Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society](#) on how to accomplish the escape, meeting with minister [James Miller McKim](#), [William Still](#), and Cyrus Burleigh. He corresponded with them to work out the details after returning to Richmond. They advised him to mail the box to the office of Quaker merchant [Passmore Williamson](#), who was active with the Vigilance Committee.^[6]

To get out of work the day he was to escape, Brown burned his hand to the bone with [sulfuric acid](#). The box in which Brown was shipped was 3 by 2.67 by 2 feet (0.91 by 0.81 by 0.61 m) and displayed the words "dry goods" on it. It was lined with baize, a coarse woolen cloth, and he carried only a small portion of water and a few biscuits. There was a single hole cut for air, and it was nailed and tied with straps.^[4] Brown later wrote that his uncertain method of travel was worth the risk: "if you have never been deprived of your liberty, as I was, you cannot realize the power of that hope of freedom, which was to me indeed, an anchor to the soul both sure and steadfast."^[7]

During the trip, which began on March 29, 1849,^[6] Brown's box was transported by wagon, railroad, steamboat, wagon again, railroad, ferry, railroad, and finally delivery wagon, being completed in 27 hours. Despite the instructions on the box of "handle with care" and "this side up," several times carriers placed the box upside-down or handled it roughly. Brown remained still and avoided detection.



Another "Resurrection of Henry Box Brown" published with an account of the story in [William Still](#)'s 1872 book [The Underground Railroad](#)

The box was received by Williamson, McKim, [William Still](#), and other members of the Philadelphia [Vigilance Committee](#) on March 30, 1849, attesting to the improvements in express delivery services.^[6] When Brown was released, one of the men remembered his first words as "How do you do, gentlemen?" He sang a [psalm](#) from the Bible, which he had earlier chosen to celebrate his release into freedom.^[8]

In addition to celebrating Brown's inventiveness, as noted by [Hollis Robbins](#), "the role of government and private express mail delivery is central to the story and the contemporary record suggests that Brown's audience celebrated his delivery as a modern postal miracle." The government postal service had dramatically increased communication and, despite southern efforts to control abolitionist literature, mailed pamphlets, letters and other materials reached the South.^[6] Cheap postage, [Frederick Douglass](#) observed in [The North Star](#), had an "immense moral bearing". As long as federal and state governments respected the privacy of the mails, everyone and anyone could mail letters and packages; almost anything could be inside. In short, the power of prepaid postage delighted the increasingly middle-class and commercial-minded North and increasingly worried the slave-holding South.^[6]

Brown's escape highlighted the power of the mail system, which used a variety of modes of transportation to connect the East Coast. The Adams Express Company, a private mail service founded in 1840, marketed its confidentiality and efficiency. It was favored by abolitionist organizations and "promised never to look inside the boxes it carried."^[6]

Life in freedom

Part of [a series](#) on

[Slavery](#)



[Contemporary](#)

[Historical](#)

By country or region

[Religion](#)

[Opposition and resistance](#)

Related

Brown became a well-known speaker for the [Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society](#) and got to know [Frederick Douglass](#). He was nicknamed "Box" at a Boston antislavery convention in May 1849, and thereafter used the name Henry Box Brown. He published two versions of his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*. The first, written with the help of Charles Stearns and conforming to expectations of the [slave narrative](#) genre,^[6] was published in Boston in 1849. The second was published in [Manchester](#), England, in 1851, after he had moved there. While on the lecture circuit in the northeastern United States, Brown developed a [moving panorama](#) with his partner James C. A. Smith which detailed both Brown's journey as well as the daily life of free and enslaved people.^[9] They separated in 1851.^[6]

Douglass wished that Brown had not revealed the details of his escape, so that others might have used it. When Samuel Smith attempted to free other slaves in Richmond in 1849, they were arrested.^[10] The year of his escape, Brown was contacted by his wife's new owner, who offered to

sell his family to him. Brown declined the offer.^[11] This was an embarrassment within the abolitionist community, which tried to keep the information private.^[6]

Brown is known for speaking out against slavery and expressing his feelings about the state of America. In his *Narrative*, he offers a cure for slavery, suggesting that slaves should be given the vote, a new president should be elected, and the North should speak out against the "spoiled child" of the South.^[12]

After passage of the [Fugitive Slave Law of 1850](#), which required cooperation from law enforcement officials to capture refugee slaves even in free states, Brown moved to England for safety, as he had become a known public figure. He toured Britain with his antislavery panorama for the next ten years, performing several hundred times a year. To earn a living, Brown also entered the British show circuit for 25 years, until 1875, after leaving the abolitionist circuit following the start of the [American Civil War](#).^[10]

In 1857, as Cutter documented in her book, *The Illustrated Slave* (2017), Brown acted in several plays written expressly for him by a British playwright – E.G. Burton – but his acting career appears to have been short-lived.^[13] In the 1860s, he began performing as a [magician](#) with acts as a [mesmerist](#) and [conjurer](#), under the show names of "Prof. H. Box Brown" and the "African Prince".^[14]

While in England in 1855, Brown married Jane Floyd, a White Cornish tin worker's daughter, and began a new family.^[15] In 1875, he returned with his new family to the U.S., with a group magic act. A later report documented the Brown Family Jubilee Singers.^[1]

Death

As the scholar Martha J. Cutter first documented in 2015, Henry Box Brown died in Toronto on June 15, 1897.^[1] Tax records and other documents indicate that he continued to perform into the early 1890s, but no performance records from that decade have been found.^[1] The last known performance by Brown is a newspaper account of a performance with his daughter Annie and wife Jane^[1] in [Brantford, Ontario](#), Canada, dated February 26, 1889.^[16]